Bricks and Mortar: Why are School Facilities in the News?

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Previous editions of Bricks and Mortar have focused on school facility topics such as the important role facilities play in education, the need for maintenance, how schools are integral parts of the community, how students’ perceptions of safety impact achievement, ways to retrofit older facilities to make them safer and how changing pedagogies impact facilities for the 21st century. This edition will continue to address the importance of school facilities; however, it will do so from a slightly different vantage point. I will examine three recent articles in which school facilities made headlines.

“Schools on military bases struggle with maintenance” read a recent headline in the Los Angeles Times. At the crux of the issue is an elementary school located on Edwards Air Force Base. The school ranks eighth out of 160 schools on the Pentagon’s priority list for improvements. Needs include a roof replacement, an upgrade to playground equipment, new doors for classes and offices, electrical upgrades, lighting upgrades, and new HVAC equipment.

All told, the price tag for these maintenance and construction projects is approximately $27.8 million, of which the locality must allocate $5.5 million. Unfortunately, the California Department of Finance denied the funding request by the California Department of Education for this and similar projects. While the federal government has agreed to provide 80% of the necessary funds, the state has declined to meet its required 20% match.

Really? What kind of message does that send to the children and parents of the elementary school and other schools in similar situations? As citizens, parents, and taxpayers, why don’t we require the same level of maintenance for the places our children learn as we provide for our own homes? Few of us would allow a leaky roof to persist or not replace an air conditioner when it is not operational. How can we allow a school with a 60% military population to have anything less? Not funding the State’s share of required repairs is paramount to a slap in the face of the federal government and all of our military families.
“Big roaches and moldy juice? Students put Sunset High cleanliness in spotlight” is a headline right out of the Miami Times. Students complained but no one responded to their allegations. After a student’s post of pictures went viral—purportedly showing moldy juice, a fat cockroach, and yellow and cloudy water from a water fountain--action was taken. The school was scrubbed clean; however, the situation sparked a petition calling for the principal’s resignation. The school also failed a facilities inspection conducted by the Florida Department of Health. The failure was a result of mold found in a storage room and in ceiling tiles.

Really? How can school administrators allow a facility to become so unkempt? How can parents that enter the facility turn a blind eye on such horrid conditions? Did faculty complaints fall upon deaf ears? Did the faculty complain or was it complacent with the filthy conditions? Why does it take a web post to go viral before anyone acknowledges the problems? These are rhetorical questions, but the facts remain, schools must be clean and sanitary.

In many situations, a school lunch is the only hot meal a student gets. It must be prepared under sanitary conditions. If a restaurant consistently failed health inspections, it would not stay in business. Likewise, a hotel with a roach or rodent problem is destined to have a very high vacancy rate. At what level of cleanliness should we maintain our schools? I would suggest that a school be as clean as a hospital. As parents and citizens, why would we want to expose our children to anything less than hospital clean? That is my recommended benchmark for a clean school building. And please do not confuse the age of a facility as a proxy for how clean it can be. Visit any federal building in our nation’s capital and you will understand my point.

Recently in Education News it was reported, “From Spending to Governance, Buffalo Facing School Turmoil.” This article discussed how $41 million was missing from a $175 million building fund to renovate deteriorating school buildings. This was discovered in the final phase of a ten-year, $1.4 billion capital restoration project. The article illustrates that school construction and renovation is big business with billions of dollars at stake. There must be adequate systems in place for oversight of public funds and accountability of those whom we entrust these funds with. This will be the topic of further posts.

I know some of you are thinking that these cases are extreme and that conditions like those mentioned do not exist in your locality. I would submit that if these conditions do not exist in your locality, you know someone who lives in a community where they do. Together, we can all help improve the places where students learn.

References:


Dr. Victor Hellman serves as the Research Project Director for the Education Facilities Clearinghouse (EFC). Dr. Hellman has more than 31 years of work experience in public schools in Virginia. Prior to joining the EFC, Dr. Hellman served as Deputy Superintendent of Operations and Support for a mid-urban school district. In that role, he was responsible for finance, facilities, transportation, student services, and food services.